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ABSTRACT

The children of migrant agricultural families are the most educationally disadvantaged group in the United States; they under-perform all other groups, have the highest dropout rate, have the lowest academic level, and have the highest number of school failures. The majority are Mexican American, Black, and Puerto Rican children whose families work in one of the three migrant "streams" from California, Texas, or Florida. Mobility patterns vary widely, and the migrant children who are able to take advantage of basic institutional social services are often excluded from mainstream educational programs. These children already suffer economic, social and cultural discrimination due to their high level of mobility and low socio-economic status; their cultural uniqueness is being challenged by agricultural pressures and the demands of a technological society. Day care centers, short-term summer programs and parental involvement have advanced migrant education, but the need for job training and basic survival skills is obvious. There has been widespread inadequacy in the administration of present local and federal programs, and a "cycle of illiteracy and poverty" is apparent. Comprehensive changes in traditional educational practices must be developed in order to alleviate their plight. (JD)

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AN INVISIBLE MINORITY: AN EXAMINATION OF MIGRANT EDUCATION

by
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If one had the task of identifying the most educationally disadvantaged group of youngsters in the United States, the ones who under-perform all other groups enrolled in school, who have the highest school dropout rate, who have the lowest academic achievement level and highest number of school failures, no doubt the group readily identified would be the children of migrant agricultural families. These children face a unique set of problems not faced by any other group of youngsters eligible to enroll in school in the various states. The migrant family, moving from state to state, alone or in groups, has created a unique life style reflecting the unpredictable agricultural conditions.

Available statistics concerning the educational plight of migrant children are unbelievable! For example, on the average these children, if they attend school at all, enroll in an average of three different schools each school year for a total of approximately seventeen weeks of instruction. In one Texas evaluation of its migrant education program, in 1968, an attempt was made to determine the percentage of migrant youth who dropped out of school prior to high school graduation. The numbers became virtually meaningless when evaluators discovered that an estimated twenty percent of all migrant children in that state never enrolled in any school at any age![1] Nationwide, fewer than ten percent of the migrant students graduate from high school. Enrollment in higher education is rare.

Who are the migrant agricultural workers? The vast majority of migrants are people of Mexican-American, Black and Puerto Rican heritage. Children of these ethnic/racial groups already suffer deprivation and isolation. Migrant children, additionally, suffer economic, cultural and social discrimination due to their high level of mobility and low socio-economic status foisted upon them by the dominant

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more stable society. Value conflicts are frequent and should be self-evident. Migrant children frequently become third class baggage of second class citizens.

Survey research concerning characteristics of migrant workers in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas has identified several major characteristics of the migrant and his family. The survey revealed the following characteristics of the migrant workers in those states.

1. Some 85 percent of the migrants were of Spanish American ancestry.
2. The average family consisted of six children plus other related adults.
3. Family unity is very strong.
4. The migrants tend to seek employment for the total family, including older children.
5. There are few unattached males in this population.
6. Permanent homes, where existent, are generally inadequate with much overcrowding.
7. Migrant camps range from acceptable to deplorable.
8. Educational level is very low.
9. Their subculture is not easily compatible with "accepted" values.
10. Annual income is very low.
11. Migrants are not fervent about religion. They are not blindly subordinated to the clergy.
12. The strong family unit does not extend to kin not in the immediate family.
13. Migrants are necessarily preoccupied with making a living.
14. They are very "present" time oriented.
15. Migrants tend to be very passive.
16. Contentment seems to prevail within the family unit.[2]

Migrant workers are usually hired in areas where the base of the local economy is agricultural but where the local agricultural labor supply is inadequate especially during harvest times. Major reasons for agricultural migration include the inability of the worker to secure regular employment in the home community, mech-

anization of agriculture, crop allotments, soil banks and high birth rates. The migrant has no roots, no single motivating force, and usually no specific organization to be of major assistance.

It is estimated there are at least three million agricultural workers in the United States who subsist on migrant and seasonal agricultural work. Most of these workers become part of one of the three migration "streams" with origins in California, Texas or Florida.[3] Mexican-Americans are the dominant group in the so called "western" and "central" streams originating in California and Texas. Blacks and Puerto Ricans constitute the bulk of the "eastern" migration stream moving along the eastern seaboard northward to the New England states and Canada.

From California the migrants move to Arizona, Oregon and Washington; from Texas migrants move either northeast through Arkansas and Mississippi to the Great Lakes region or to the northwest through New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. In all three geographic areas, the migrants remain in the area only as long as there is productive work. Then the movement northward continues for as long as the agricultural season lasts.

Mobility patterns vary widely among the migrants. Some migrant families move only within one state and thereby become "intrastate" migrants. Those who move across state boundaries are "interstate" migrants. In addition to the three "home base" states, there are thirty-five other states where there is a substantial migrant agricultural labor force residing from three to six months each year. Migrants are commonly employed for shorter time periods in ten other states.

Children of migrant workers are particularly victimized by these conditions. Migrants are unable to take advantage of basic institutional social services available to most people residing in the United States, including opportunities for elementary and secondary education for their children. Migrant children are almost completely excluded from mainstream educational programs. Because of the mobility of the family, these children are withdrawn from school in order to accompany their

families annual work trek northward. The children may or may not be enrolled or reenroll in another school in the new work location. Usually they do not and their education is again interrupted. Without education, these children are not afforded the opportunity to break out of the migrant agricultural pattern of their parents.

With increasing mechanization in agriculture and the reduction of the number of migrant agricultural workers, the need for education and technical training for migrant youth becomes more vital each passing agricultural season. With less agricultural work available it is a matter of personal survival and economic necessity that children of agricultural workers find employment outside agriculture. Of necessity this means these children need to adjust to a different lifestyle and environment. The need for migrants to learn basic survival skills should be obvious. The opportunities, however, may be lacking. The migrants cultural uniqueness is being challenged by agricultural pressures and the demands of a technological society.

Only within the last decade and a half has there been a national commitment to improve the educational opportunities of migrant children. For example, in the decade of the 1930's religious organizations, e.g., the National Friends Society, National Council of Churches, and the Catholic Rural Life Conference, provided services to the migrant families by sponsoring part time summer schools and day care centers. During the 1940's and 1950's federal and state agencies began to become concerned with problems faced by migrants. Federal funding for migrants, however, was not available until the 1960's. In 1962 Congress passed the Migrant Health Act which provided health care to migrants; in 1962 Congress funded the Economic Opportunity Act (Title III-B) to assist migrant families with day care centers, health and nutritional care, minimum standard housing and vocational training. Finally, Congress provided categorical aide to provide special educational services for migrant children under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.[4] The latter two legislative actions were part of the "War on Poverty." As federal support for migrants has increased, so has the number of children served

by the federal mandated programs.

Congress, through Title I ESEA funding, clearly regards the education of migrant children as important and one of interstate and national concern. There are, however, no uniform procedures for assessing the needs of migrant children. Extensive coordination of efforts between states is lacking. Program planning seems to be done locally and for the most part seems to fit local district needs and priorities rather than concentrating on the special educational needs of the migrant student. Evaluation of migrant programs remain a problem. The uniform Migrant Student Record Transfer system housed in Arkansas does not fully solve the problem since these records reflect a hodgepodge of needs assessments and program evaluation, rather than learning achieved. Furthermore, such records may not have current data as there seems to be some laxity among school personnel in recording and forwarding such data.

To implement migrant education programs authorized under ESEA Title I, states and school districts are required to design programs to meet the educational needs of both current and former migrant students (students who have been migrants in the preceeding five years). Audits of selected Title I programs indicates that districts in some instances were using these special funds for general aid and/or regular educational services. Misuse of funds may be attributed partially to local district personnel who feel little responsibility for educating migrant children whose parents are transitory, who do not vote or pay taxes in the district and who are only in school for part of the academic year.

The challenge of securing an education for the migrant student is formidable. Migrant children may be in school at most four or five months of the school year. Crop vacations (schools closing to allow local students to help harvest crops) further reduces the opportunity for migrant children to enroll in local schools. Migrant children are usually overage for their respective grade level; they live in a limited cultural environment; and they are unreached by common teaching strategies.

Language skills in either Spanish or English are lacking. For example, in Oklahoma it was found that only one-third of the migrant adults were able to read and write English and that fewer than one half could read and write Spanish although this was their primary language. The adults had developed a linguistic code (colloquialisms) to maintain social relationships. This code, however, was not suited for sharing familiar experiences and opinions, for analysis and careful reasoning, for dealing with hypothetical and beyond the present, or for dealing with complex or abstract thoughts.[5] The parents limited communication skills handicapped their childrens communication skills and speech development patterns and further hindered their childrens learning opportunities.

What steps have been taken to assist in the educational process for migrants? Efforts are varied from state to state. The quality of the program depends on available resources, personnel, learning activities, etc. The number of students reached varies considerably depending upon geographic location of the educational facilities in relation to the migrant camp, camp facilities, parental cooperation, efforts to recruit students, programs offered, etc.

The establishment of day care centers at or near camp sites are an important component in educational and social services available to migrant children. In general, day care centers, operating for children under five years of age, provide enrichment types of academic training and opportunities for social participation. Health and dental care and establishing sound nutrition habits are considered integral to the day care program. In many instances parents are supportive of the day care program as a vehicle to help their children gain basic learning and social skills needed for success for potential regular school learning. On the other hand, however, some parents view the day care program as a means to allow them to work in the fields without being hindered by leaving younger children at home alone or in the care of older siblings or even locked in cars.

Usual activities in day care centers include language development activities,

field trips, physical exercise, listening skills, nutrition breaks, medical/dental check-ups, rest periods, etc. For the migrant children with regular attendance teachers frequently noted growth in social skills, self-esteem and self-concept which stemmed from the learning activities in the day care programs.

Once the migrant child has reached school age the ideal would be regular attendance in the local school. This, however, is an unreal expectation! Short term summer school or summer programs have been established by various states and school districts to help meet the presumed needs of migrant youth. A wide variety of programs exist. Focus at this level remains on language development, including English-as-a-second language, and reading skills. Field trips create additional motivation for learning. Mathematics, science and social science receive less attention or focus in most of the existing programs. Individual or small group instruction is usually the dominant mode of instruction. Usually weekly learning themes are developed for an integrated curriculum approach to learning. This approach has been selected to allow for maximum student learning and success with school oriented tasks.

Visits to the migrant camps by the teachers encourage parents to help their children learn. These visits often help parents to overcome their own previous negative experiences related to their own personal education. Most migrant parents did not complete elementary school. Parental attitudes concerning education and views of society are conveyed to the children. Educational attainment is not usually a high priority for the migrant family.

School attendance declines as migrant youths become older. He/she falls further behind academically and becomes more frustrated. Education for the secondary age student becomes even more of a problem and challenge. School districts with secondary programs usually develop some type of learn/earn program to enable the secondary aged student to learn basic skills, to earn money and to gain job related experience in a field other than agriculture. Health education and career

orientation are usually included in these programs.

Efforts to measure achievement levels of migrant students systematically are usually invalid due to student absence during the testing periods, difficulty in obtaining meaningful pre/post test results, inability of the testers to speak the language of the children and the difficulty in establishing test rapport. It is known that many migrant students lack facility with the English language and the level of their basic academic skill achievement is typically two to four years behind grade level expectation based on chronological age. This may mean that several children of different ages from the same family may be assigned to the same grade if and when they are enrolled in school. In addition, these children generally are faced with severe health and dental problems due to inadequate diet and health service utilization. Malnutrition is common among migrant students.

The average yearly income of a migrant family is approximately $3,000, well below the poverty level. This economic condition contributes to non-attendance at school. Migrant children frequently do not have sufficient clothing or the proper clothing for school. Brothers and sisters frequently share clothes and shoes which may result in the children taking turns attending school -- hardly conducive to continuity in learning. School fees required in some districts may also present economic burdens to the family.

At all levels of education regular attendance for continuity of learning is a major problem. As the migrant child becomes isolated from his/her classmates both socially and intellectually, the migrant child grows to resent school which is viewed as an unpleasant place of failure. Dropouts are usual. With state after state imposing minimum competencies for high school graduation it can be assumed fewer migrant students will become high school graduates and able to withdraw from the migrant cycle of work. The cycle of illiteracy and poverty will continue for the migrant.

Schools frequently perceive the educational programs of migrant children as

temporal and have responded accordingly. For example, physical facilities may be inadequate, curriculum materials and supplies may be lacking or entirely inappropriate. Migrant children using materials developed for white English-speaking children will find these materials and methods irrelevant -- culturally, linguistically, economically, and perceptually. Many times the migrant child is encouraged to disregard his/her cultural heritage and self-esteem. Existing curricula have built-in continuity and sequence and presume certain prerequisite skills have been previously mastered. For the migrant child, the assumed prerequisite skills may not have been mastered. The migrant child is forced to move from unknown to less known rather than from known to unknown.

In some school settings migrant children are segregated from the rest of the student body and have only limited, if any, contact with the resident children. At times and in some districts migrant children were assigned to an extended day program lasting two hours after the regular school day. Migrant children saw the resident children leaving school at 3:00 and interpreted the added school hours, more of the same, as punishment for being a migrant. Many times teachers assigned to migrant children classrooms do not meet the highest professional standards, have limited cultural sensitivity to the migrant child and view their culture, language, work and instability in a negative manner.[6] Thus a negative self-fulfilling prophecy image is reflected by the migrant children.

An earlier California survey of eighty administrators of schools serving migrant children reported the following as serious problems related to the education of migrant children. The numbers in parenthesis indicate the number of respondents identifying a particular problem.

1. Migrancy itself including such areas of concern as the mobility of the children themselves, loss of school days, irregular attendance, lack of continuity in learning, the need of the children to frequently adjust to strange groups, new teachers and new environments. (39)

2. Low student achievement in virtually all areas of study. (20)

3. Record keeping problems related to recording school achievement and learning activities. (19)

4. Finding the achievement levels, assigning children to the proper class and grade was complicated due to differences in curriculum, grading and reporting practices in the various states. (15)

5. Real or perceived indifference of parents regarding the welfare of their children. (13)

6. Problems of health and cleanliness. (13)

7. Lack of proper food and/or clothing. (13)

8. Poor housing coupled with a general background of social and cultural deprivation. (12)

9. Lack of emotional stability, interest and purpose coupled with a poor social adjustment and low morale on the part of students. (16)

10. Need for English-as-a-second language instruction. (11)

11. Need to have sufficient books and materials for the children. (5)

12. Attendance problems related with the need for children to work for added family income. (3)

13. Irregular school attendance because a low average daily attendance count reduced the amount of funding available to the district. (2)

14. Entrance of migrant children to classes disturbs the morale of the teachers and children of a school or district who are the permanent residents in the area. (3)

15. Increase class size with the arrival of migrant children. (1)

16. Increase in the need to have an adequate supply of credentialed teachers available to meet increased enrollments when migrant children enroll in local schools. (1)

17. Housing for teachers would assist in the recruitment of teachers to serve the migrant students. (1)[7]

The migrant child does poorly in school because s/he is mobile, poor, culturally and linguistically different. These characteristics are preceived as negative by society, and are expressed by the schools and easily experienced and learned by the child. Until there is a comprehensive change in educational practices this segment of our society will be denied equal educational opportunity and the opportunity for a better life.

A sense of urgency is needed to help improve the educational opportunities

of an invisible minority. Old attitudes of indifference and negativism on the part of schools must be eliminated. New opportunities and practices must be developed. Schools are not the only institutions which do not respond to the special needs of migrants. Other social institutions contribute to the problems of migrant workers and their families. Efforts to alleviate their plight have been unsuccessful because of efforts to extend a system incompatible with the characteristics of a migrant. Traditional attempts to provide more of the same have not been successful. Equal treatment does not constitute equality of educational opportunity. Schools can meet the special needs of these children through adaptability, comprehensiveness and resources. Revamping needs to take place in institutional philosophies, administrative policies, scope and sequence, curriculum, extra-curricular activities, staffing, student personnel services, non-instructional needs, community involvement and evaluation. Educational responses must be comprehensive to be meaningful and relevant.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jose A. Cardenas, "Education and The Children of Migrant Farmworkers: An Overview," Inequality in Education, Center for Law and Education, Harvard University, June, 1976.

2. James O. Schnur, A Synthesis of Current Research in Migrant Education, ERIC/CRESS, Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1970.

3. "Selected Farm Wage Worker Households and National Farm Worker Programs," Economic Research Service, Department of Agriculture, Washington, 1975.

4. 42 U.S.C. 24th and 42 U.S.C. 2861 et. seq.

5. Schnur, op, cit.

6. Cardenas, op. cit.

7. Afton Bill Nance, Migrant Children in California Schools: A 1961 Survey of Schools Serving Children of Seasonal Farm Workers, State Department of Education, Sacramento, 1961, ERIC 002 611.